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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, EUR/ERA, PRM/ANE, IO/UNP, IO/RHS,
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TAGS: [KCRM](#) [KWMN](#) [LA](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [SMIG](#) [UNDP](#)
SUBJECT: CASE OF 26 MISSING HMONG CHILDREN STILL OF CONCERN

REF: VIENTIANE 801

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach per 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) This cable requests the Department pass an action request to Embassy Luxembourg; please see paragraph 14. It also has kudos for USUN and Embassy Sweden which we request the Department pass on; please see paragraph 15.

¶2. (C) Summary: &Like-minded8 senior diplomats met to discuss the case of the 26 missing children, a case that has been unresolved since December 2005. There was concern that the children may have been secretly deported back to Thailand or even dispersed throughout the Lao countryside. Until resolved, this case continues to be raised both in Vientiane and abroad. Meetings held by UN Under Secretary General Gambari, the raising of the issue at the recent UNICEF Executive Board meeting, and a possible intervention by the UN Secretariat during the UNGA are keeping the pressure on the Lao government to &come clean8 about the whereabouts of these children. End summary.

The &Like-Minded8 Gather

¶3. (C) The Ambassador hosted a working luncheon focused on human rights issues September 13. Attending were the Ambassadors of Australia, France, and Germany; Charges from Poland, Sweden, and the European Union (EU); Representatives from both the UN Development Program (UNDP) and UN Children's Fund (UNICEF); and additional officers from the Australian, French, German, and Swedish Embassies who focus on human rights.

The Missing 26 Children

¶4. (C) The case of the 26 missing Hmong children remained a focus for the discussion. These children were detained by the Lao after they were unofficially deported by local Thai officials in December 2005. UNICEF Country Representative Olivia Yambi reviewed for the group key points regarding the August visit to Laos of UNICEF Regional Director for East Asia and the Pacific Anupama Rao Singh (reftel). When Director Singh raised the issue of the missing children in her meeting with Lao Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Thongloun Sisoulith, Ms. Yambi noted that Thongloun responded

that he was &shocked that the issue keeps coming up.⁸ Director Singh repeated to the FM her view that UNICEF's mandate was to focus on helping all children but that the fate of every individual was also of concern.

15. (C) Ms. Yambi pointed out that Director Singh's visit preceded the opening on September 5 of the annual UNICEF Executive Board (EB) session, and Director Singh had encouraged the FM to have the Lao Permanent Mission in New York attend the meeting to be able both to listen to the debate about renewing the UNICEF program for Laos and to respond to any statements raised by EB members. In the end, both the United States and Sweden, according to Ms. Yambi's information &gently⁸ raised the missing children on the margins of the EB meeting, precipitating a predictable Lao reaction that the government had no information.

16. (C) Ms. Yambi also told the group that, before the UNICEF Board meeting, UN Under-Secretary General Gambari had met separately with the Lao Permrep (August 29) and the Thai Permrep (August 30) to try and help resolve this case. Because the Lao continued to say they lacked precise information about the children, and the Thais have said they have provided sufficient information orally, Gambari asked the Thais to put their information in writing for the Lao. Ms. Yambi told the group she did not have any further information on progress from the intervention of USyG Gambari.

UNICEF Note

17. (C) Note: UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman, in an August 31 letter to the Ambassador said that, if the case of the missing children remains unresolved in September, the United Nations Secretariat intends to raise it at the highest level with Lao and Thai representatives at the UNGA. End note.

An Issue Of Confidence

18. (C) French Ambassador Maurice Portiche opined that, at this point, the two parties need to be brought together at a high level with a third party, such as the UN, present to make progress. EU Charge Sandro Cerrato asked the group whether its focus should remain on the 26 missing children or whether this case should be combined with other larger issues involving the Lao government's treatment of its Hmong minority. The Ambassador responded that highlighting the children's ethnicity may be counter-productive. German Ambassador Dr. Peter Weinand pointed out that the passage of so much time has made it harder for the Lao government to release the children at this time. In response, Swedish Counselor Jorgen Persson argued for keeping a special focus on the children: resolving this case is an indication of whether the Lao government is willing and able to keep its commitments; if this is brought into the larger issue of the Lao government's treatment of the Hmong, it will be easier for the Lao to dodge their responsibilities. UNDP Resident Representative a.i. Setsuko Yamazaki affirmed the need for the group to speak with one voice on this case.

Where Are The Children?

19. (C) The Ambassador pointed out that the last information on the group indicated the girls may have been moved from Bolikhamsai Province to a detention facility in Savannakhet Province this past February. Ambassador Portiche said he had &intelligence⁸ from Thailand that the entire group of children had already been trafficked back to Thailand. In contrast, Australian Ambassador Alistair Maclean said he had received information during the past week that, rather than having been trafficked back across the river into Thailand, the children had been dispersed within Laos) the older ones possibly married off as part of breaking up the group. (Comment: we have had no information from our usual sources to confirm either report since hearing that the girls had been moved from Bolikhamsai to Savannakhet. End comment.) In either case, the intent of both sides seems clear: if/when any members of the group emerge, the Lao and Thai can both

avoid being deemed as complicit in the original deportation (the Thai side) as well as the extended detention (the Lao side) by saying that this had been a trafficking case all the time.

¶10. (C) The Ambassador noted a major Buddhist celebration in Savannakhet Province in July attracted a large number of visitors going back and forth from Thailand for several days and may have been an ideal opportunity to sneak members of this group across the border to Thailand a few at a time. We alerted the Department and Embassy Bangkok of our concern at the time, and Embassy Bangkok in turn alerted the Thai government.

Human Rights Activities

¶11. (C) Two upcoming bilateral activities will provide formal venues for raising the case of the missing children. EU Charge Cerrato noted that a joint EU-Lao Commission at the end of September would address human rights issues. This group, which meets every two years, mainly deals with development assistance. It will be led by the EU's Deputy Director of External Relations. Ambassador Maclean also told the group Australia would have its first bilateral Human Rights Dialogue October 2-5 in Vientiane. The first day would be for discussing the formal agenda; the next day would be for calls at various ministries and organizations; and then the delegation would go to a province, possibly Bolikhamsai, to look at local conditions. Ambassador Maclean said he hoped the group would also be able to visit a local prison while in the province.

Luxembourg PM Visit

¶12. (C) However, the group was somewhat concerned to hear that the Prime Minister of Luxembourg is planning to visit Vientiane later this month. Apparently Luxembourg is planning a large grant of assistance for Laos. The group consensus was that it would be important for the Luxembourg Prime Minister to at least refer to the missing children in the context of human rights issues of concern during the visit. Otherwise Lao officials could come to believe, despite for example the strong role being undertaken by USyG Gambari, that international interest in the case is waning and that only the Lao-based diplomatic community is concerned.

Future Action

¶13. (C) For the moment, the group is focused on whether any progress can be made via USyG Gambari's dialogue or possibly a higher-level dialogue during the UNGA which brings the two sides together. The Ambassador briefed the group about planned October visits by DRL A/S Lowenkron and EAP DAS Eric John. Both visits will provide opportunities to discuss the missing children. DAS John's visit is designed to open a U.S.-Lao dialogue on a range of issues; up to this point most visits by senior U.S. officials have been program-focused on issues such as POW/MIA accounting or unexploded ordnance for example. The Swedish Charge noted that Stockholm will host a Sweden-Lao meeting beginning November 6; the Lao delegation will be led by MFA Permanent Secretary Somphet Khousakoun who has been designated to head the new Lao delegation to be established in Geneva in the near future.

Action Request

¶14. (C) Embassy Vientiane asks the Department to pass the following action request to Embassy Luxembourg: Please contact the Luxembourg Foreign Ministry and ensure officials in the Prime Minister's party visiting Laos are aware of the importance of this humanitarian case and our strong recommendation that at least some reference to the importance of resolving this case be made during this visit.

Kudos

¶15. (C) We also ask the Department to pass on kudos to USUN

and Embassy Stockholm to be extended to those involved in raising the issue of the missing children during the UNICEF Executive Board meeting. We believe it was an important marker of continued international concern for the Lao.

Comment

¶16. (C) We are pleased that the like-minded group remains strongly focused on resolving the case of these missing children. As the Swedish Counselor pointed out, this has become a symbol of how the Lao government operates, and whether the Lao government can be trusted to keep its commitments. The support from the international community remains vital to keeping the pressure on the Lao, so USyG Gambari,s efforts, those of the UNICEF leadership, and a possible intervention by the UN Secretariat during the UNGA are most welcome.

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